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SERMON,

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH

OF THE

HONORABLE ALEXANDER RANKIN,

PREACHED IN ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, NEWCASTLE;

FRIDAY, 7TH MAY, 1852.

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM HENDERSON, M. A.

MIRAMICHI :

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ACTS XIII, 36. *“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep.”*

WE are frequently reminded, both in the record of God's Word, and in the dispensations of God's providence, that this is not our rest. Often, however, do we read the admonitions of God's Word with callous and untouched hearts. The dispensations of Providence frequently produce a softening influence on the soul, and diffuse a thoughtfulness which prepares the mind for listening with deeper attention to the lessons of God's Word; and thus the teachings of the word of truth, taken in connection with the impressions made by providential dispensations, frequently find an

entrance into the soul, and are there blessed to the spiritual advantage of the hearers.

With this view, in connection with the melancholy event, on account of which we have now met, let me solicit your attention to a few lessons which are deducible from the words in which inspiration has caused the death of a great and good man to be recorded—words, so selected as to be eminently calculated to afford us many important and useful lessons.

I. We notice, then, in the first place, that our text intimates that there is a limited period appointed for man's continuance in this life. It is but for one generation. "For David, after he had served his *own generation* by the will of God, fell on sleep." The life of man is thus confined to his own generation, and that is but a short period. "The days of our years," says the writer of the ninetyeth Psalm, "are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

To the young, who are now in the morning of their days, buoyant with the strength and vivacity of youth, such a number of years may appear long to look forward to; but to the aged, who look back upon them, they seem but very short. An aged Patriarch, whose days had stretched far beyond this number, on looking back on the period he had passed through, could say, "Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been," though

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they had then reached one hundred and thirty years. (Gen. XLVII. 9.)

But no fixed number of years is allotted to us on earth ; for as our life is short, so is it uncertain. We have a service to perform to our own generation, and when that service is accomplished, we must retire from the busy activities of life, and follow our fathers to the land of forgetfulness. Hence, the Scripture often represents the amount of human life by a term conveying the idea of a far shorter period than the word generation. It is often represented as a day—a day of service. Job, speaking of the shortness of human life, says : " Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass. Turn from him that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day." (Job XIV. 5, 6.) Our Saviour likewise speaks of the continuance of man's life on earth as a day, the termination of it as a night : " I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day ; the night cometh, when no man can work." (John IX. 4.) To this there is also an allusion in the text, where David, after having served his generation during the day of his life, is said to have fallen on sleep at the night of death.

David was the King of Israel, the man after God's own heart, the inspired composer of hymns which have been sung in the Church from David's time to the present day, and yet even he, after he had served his own genera-

tion by the will of God, must fall on sleep, and be laid unto his fathers, and see corruption. This is the unavoidable lot of all men; for, since by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, so death hath passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. It is appointed unto all men once to die, and none can avoid that appointment. "There is no man," says Solomon, "that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war." (Eccl. VIII. 8.) Neither power, nor fame, nor wealth, nor goodness, can ward off the dart of death, or secure for their possessor an abiding inheritance on earth. The King must come down from his ancestral throne, the General must retire from his command, the Senator must depart from the legislative hall, the Philosopher must cease from his studies, and the Merchant must resign his pursuit of gain, at the call of death, and obey the summons of that all-conquering monarch. However important or beneficial may have been the pursuits they were engaged in, they must all go with their own generation, and leave the affairs of succeeding generations to be managed by those who are to come after them.

Should not this teach us, then, not to be laying up treasures on earth, but to seek that we may have an inheritance in heaven? We have but a day to continue here. We have only to serve our own generation; and we

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cannot carry with us to the other world either the wealth we have amassed, or the honors we have acquired. These all have their use on earth; they may all be made subservient to the advantage of our own generation, and many good men have been entrusted with much of these, that with them they might be enabled to serve their generation by the will of God. But there is something more needed by the never-dying soul; and therefore let us never forget, whatever earthly portion we may have, that we must seek for some more permanent possessions—even an inheritance which is incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away—an inheritance which cannot be purchased with this world's wealth, but which is freely offered to all who look for salvation through Christ. Christ's precious blood was shed to purchase this inheritance for his people, and all who are possessed of a living faith in Him, are made heirs of the glory which is to be revealed. O then let us seek earnestly that we may have that faith which worketh by love, which overcomes the world, and which unites to the Saviour that being found in him, not having on our own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, we may be presented spotless before the Throne of God, and obtain an inheritance among them that are sanctified through the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

II. We learn also from the text that during the period of our continuance on earth, we

have all a duty allotted to us by our Creator. We have to serve our generation by the will of God.

So clearly has the Creator impressed this duty on the minds of men, that, even without the light of revelation, a heathen could say, "We are not born for ourselves alone." The Creator has so constituted the human race, that every individual is dependent on the services of others, and by this mutual dependence the whole family of man is bound together in the bonds of social union. The King who sits upon the throne is dependent on the services of his subjects, and to secure that service he is bound to serve them. David, the King of Israel, "served his own generation by the will of God." Different individuals have different duties devolving on them, according to the station in which God has placed them ; but none can plead exemption from a share in the allotment of duties. Some may serve their generation by the labour of their hands, some by the superiority of their intellectual faculties, some in ministering to the temporal wants of their fellow men, others in promoting their spiritual interests. Some may take their part in the allotted duties of life as governors, and others as subjects. But all must take some part. There is none so high as to be excused ; none so low as to be incapable.

Some may be raised up by Providence to benefit future generations. By the strength of intellect with which they have been endowed, by their continued application to study, by

plans of benevolence which they have devised, or by favorable circumstances in which they have been placed, they may have been enabled to achieve such improvements in literature, make such discoveries in art or science, or introduce such institutions, as shall carry down their names with honour to future generations, or they may at their deaths so dispose of the wealth which they have acquired during life, as to render it productive of benefit to mankind, for many generations after they have been removed from the land of the living. Yet none of these things will excuse them from serving their own generation. David was serviceable to succeeding generations by the preparations which during his lifetime he made for the erection of that Temple which his successor, Solomon, built, for the service of God at Jerusalem, and by the composition of Psalms, which have been employed by many generations in the worship of God. Yet David did not neglect to serve his own generation. By establishing the kingdom of Israel in righteousness, setting an example of piety and goodness, and encouraging others in all that was good, he was eminently serviceable to his own generation. So we ought all to seek to serve our own generation. This we can all do by showing an example of patient submission to the divine will, faithfulness in the discharge of relative duties, diligence in business in the various stations in which Providence has placed us, and fervency of spirit in serving the Lord.

It is thus the will of God that we should all serve our generation. Our first duty is to serve the Lord, and unless we do this we cannot effectually serve our generation ; but if we serve the Lord in spirit and in truth, we shall assuredly feel that our next duty is to serve our generation ; for the same authority which commands us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, enjoins us also to love our neighbour as ourselves ; and true piety is the surest foundation on which the service of our generation can be built. The will of God is the best rule to guide us in the discharge of the duties which we owe to our fellow men. The written record of that will should therefore be our constant study. David made the Word of God his guide : " O how love I thy law ! It is my meditation all the day. Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. (Ps. CXIX. 97, 105.)

But further, the serving of our generation by the will of God implies the diligent performance of the duties which our situation in life, or our position in society, devolves upon us. That servant serves his generation who is faithful in executing the trust reposed in him, as well as the master who is just, and kind and considerate towards those whom Providence has placed under his charge. And as it is Providence that assigns to each individual his station in life, so it is the will of God that each individual should perform the duties of his own situation. God requires not the sub-

ject to perform the peculiar duties of the king, nor the king to perform the peculiar duties of the subject. He asks not from him that has received but one talent the same amount of return as from him that has received ten talents. But he requires every one in that station in which he is placed, and according to the ability which God has given, to seek to serve his generation. This is to be done so long as God continues to us health and strength; for it is God that appoints the length of our days: the number of our months is with Him.

This, then, should teach us to be diligent in seeking to serve our generation. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do," says Solomon, (Eccl. IX. 10.) "do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest." "Let us not be weary in well-doing," says the Apostle, (Gal. VI. 9, 10), "for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." Remembering that our time is short, let us seek to be diligent in serving our generation, not in the hopes of thereby purchasing an inheritance in heaven, for no human merits can accomplish that, but out of gratitude to Him who died for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

III. We notice, thirdly, from the words of our text, the peaceful termination of a good man's life: "For David, after he had served his own generation, by the will of God, fell on sleep." Sleep is an expression often used in Scripture in reference to the death of believers; not because the soul, as some have supposed, falls then into a state of insensibility or unconsciousness, and continues in that condition till the Resurrection: for we have, in Scripture, sufficient grounds for believing that the soul of the believer, immediately after death, enters upon the enjoyment of a state of blessedness. In the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Christ represents both as being in a state of consciousness after death—the one in a state of comfort, the other in a state of suffering.—"But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and thou art tormented." [Luke XVI. 25.] "To-day," said our Saviour to the thief on the cross, "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." [Luke XXIII. 43.] The Apostle Paul, harassed with the care of all the Churches, and suffering from persecution, yet burning with intense desire to propagate the kingdom of his beloved Master upon the earth, and to instruct and comfort believers, tells the Philippians that he was "in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better;" [Phil. I. 23.] and he speaks of being absent from the body as being present with the Lord. [2 Cor. V. 8.]

Death, therefore, is not compared to sleep on account of its leaving the soul in a state of unconsciousness, but on account of the repose which the body obtains in the grave, and the rest from the cares, and toils, and troubles of life which the soul enjoys in the presence of its God.

From the day that sin entered into the world, man has been doomed to eat his bread in the sweat of his face. His body is subject to many pains, and his mind is the seat of many cares and sorrows. The believer has many temptations to contend with—a severe spiritual warfare to endure. But at death he is delivered from all his toils, his sufferings, his sorrows, and his fears, and he enters into the rest which remains for the people of God. From the time that he falls on the sleep of death, his sufferings are over, for death is the last enemy that he has to encounter. No cares nor toils, no animosities nor fears, disturb the repose of the grave; and into that world to which the soul is gone, nothing can enter that will give any annoyance. The soul, there purified from all its corruptions, and conformed to the image of its Saviour, shall enjoy perfect and uninterrupted happiness for ever and ever. Of the greatness of the happiness enjoyed by believers after death we can yet form no adequate conception: for eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, what things God hath prepared for them that love Him. Hence, the

Scripture more frequently sets it forth by describing its negative qualities, than by seeking to convey to us adequate conceptions of the intensity of enjoyment experienced by the redeemed.

But, further, the believers' death may be compared to sleep, not only to remind us of the rest which remains for the people of God, but also to intimate that as the dawn of morning breaks in upon the darkness of night, and rouses up the sleeper to the vivacity and enjoyment of a new day, so the Resurrection Morning will dawn upon the darkness of the grave, and call forth the sleeping dust to the activities and enjoyments of eternal day. The sleep of the grave is not eternal. Christ Jesus has brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. The Saviour has said, "Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming, in which all that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." [John V. 28, 29.] When Christ shall come to Judgment, them that sleep in Jesus will he bring with him; and having pronounced their acquittal from the Judgment Seat, he will take them with him to his Heavenly Kingdom, where they shall be ever present with the Lord. There their sun shall no more go down, and the days of their mourning shall be ended. In that city to which they go "they have no need of the sun,

neither of the moon to shine in it ; for the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it : and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day : for there shall be no night there." [Rev. XXI. 23,-25.]

How happy, then, are they, who after having served their generation by the will of God, fall on sleep in Jesus. Theirs is a glorious inheritance, not purchased by the services they have performed, or secured by their own merits ; but purchased by the blood of Christ, and freely bestowed on all who believe. Let us, then, be diligent in making our calling and election sure, serving our generation by the will of God, and thereby proving our union to Christ as our living head, that when we also fall on sleep, we may enter into that rest which remains for the people of God.

These lessons, conveyed to us by the Word of God, have been impressively repeated in the dispensation of Providence, on account of which we have met this day.

We have met, we trust, to listen to the voice of God's Word and Providence, as well as to show our deep respect to the memory of one, who having served his generation by the will of God, has now fallen on sleep. It is not our province to usurp the prerogative of the Judge of all, or to divulge the sentence which it be-

longs to the Son of Man alone to pronounce ; but it is our part to notice what is worthy of our imitation in him who is fallen on sleep, and to point out the instructive lessons which this sad event is calculated to suggest.

1st. Then, we observe that in his life he set an example of serving his generation in many respects. Providence blessed his temporal enterprises, and thus enabled him to furnish the means of support to many families. By the blessing of God upon steady industry and persevering attention to business, he was enabled for a long period of time to furnish employment to a great number ; and I believe it will be admitted by all who have been in his employment, that, as a master, justice, integrity and uniform kindness have ever marked his conduct.

And as he prospered himself, so he was delighted to see others prospering also. Wherever he found any who were anxious to do well, he was always willing to encourage them, and even to stretch out to them a helping hand.

The kindliness of his disposition inclined him always to sympathise with others in their misfortunes, and his sympathy was manifested in the most delicate manner. Many have received tokens of his kindly feeling, of which none ever knew but the person who received them ; for he was one of those " who do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame." He ne-

ver sought to blazon abroad the acts of kindness which he performed, nay, he even shrunk from the idea of having them mentioned.

The poor ever found in him a kind and liberal benefactor. To him might justly be applied the description which is given of the patriarch Job : " The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me ; and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy." [Job XXIX. 13.]

In the old settlers, with whom he had been long acquainted, he ever felt a deep interest. Though he had risen in the world he did not look down on any of them, nor forget their past services. While they maintained an honest and reputable character, however poor they might be, they had always free access to him, and were ever treated with respect and kindness.

Of his gentlemanly manners, mild, unassuming disposition, and bountiful hospitality to his acquaintances and friends, I will not speak, nor will I dwell on the manner in which, as a representative of this County, he served his generation for a great number of years ; for most of you know, even better than I do, what time and attention he devoted to the duties that devolved on him as a Legislator ; and how he employed the accurate and extensive knowledge which he possessed of the country, for the purpose of promoting its prosperity in every possible way. Neither would I say much

of the active encouragement which he gave to Agriculture and Domestic Manufactures, and to everything which he thought had a tendency to bring comfort to families, and secure their temporal prosperity.

There are, however, one or two traits in his character which deserve a more particular notice.

He took a deep interest in the education of the young. Believing that the happiness and good order of society depended very much on the moral and religious training of the young, he ever exhibited a marked attention to whatever had a tendency to improve the mode of education, and to secure its advantages to the rising generation. Hence, he was anxious to obtain information concerning the improvements introduced into schools; hence he often took an opportunity of inculcating on the settlers in distant and destitute localities, the importance of obtaining teachers, and even contributed largely to the building of Schools, and in many places, also, to the maintenance of Teachers.

Nor was he less desirous that the services of the Sanctuary should be supported. To this Church, in particular, he has been a steady and efficient supporter, contributing liberally himself, and encouraging others to do likewise. Nor was his liberality confined to this Church, nor even to that branch of the Christian Church to which he belonged; for,

though himself conscientiously attached to the Church of Scotland, he yet wished to see all others enabled to worship God according to their own consciences.

He also set an example of regular attendance on the house of God, never allowing any trivial excuse to prevent him from going up to the Sanctuary and taking his place among the worshippers assembled there. The inclemency of the weather never kept him back from the assemblies of God's people; and, when there, none appeared to listen with deeper attention to the preaching of the Gospel, or to manifest a more devout or exemplary conduct in the house of God.

Thus by his life he still speaks to us, leaving to us a bright example, that we, in our several stations, may seek to serve our generation by the will of God.

2nd. Nor does he only speak to us by his life; but, alas! he now speaks to us by his death. After having served his own generation by the will of God, he has fallen asleep. And is not this calculated impressively to remind us that we all must, in like manner, soon submit to the stroke of death? There is no possibility of escaping this. If wealth could have purchased exemption, if human skill could have devised the means of deliverance, if the love and attention of attached relatives, could have delayed the hour of his departure; if the wants of a numerous class of

dependence or the wishes of a community could have kept him here, he would still have been in the land of the living. But here we see an impressive proof that nothing can avert the approach of death, or secure our lives beyond their appointed time.

To the aged especially this dispensation affords a most impressive lesson. He who has now departed from the land of the living, was for forty years a resident in Miramichi, and on the first day of January last, completed the sixty-third year of his age. I see before me many whose appearance indicates that they are approaching the number of years which sums up the period allotted to human life. You, my hearers, have been the cotemporaries and companions of him who is gone; you belong to his generation, and like him you must also go with your generation. Your continuance here cannot now be long. Oh! seek, then, to prepare to meet your God. Delay not; for time is rapidly carrying you on to that land from which no travellers return. Your companions on the way, those of your own generation, are rapidly dropping off. Oh, that this may teach you so to number your days, that you may apply your hearts unto wisdom—that heavenly wisdom which maketh wise unto salvation.

To those of you, my hearers, who are younger, this also gives a call to be diligent in seeking to serve your generation while health and strength remain, and opportunities are afford-

ed. These opportunities will soon pass away. Your generation will soon be all gone, and you will have to accompany them too. Though you may be now but just entering on the stage of active life, yet do not flatter yourselves with the expectation of a long continuance. Your life at furthest cannot continue very long, and it may very soon terminate. Human life is limited to three score and ten or four score years, but it is not ensured for that period. The young die as well as the old. The infant passes from its mother's breast to the tomb, as well as the man who is bowed down beneath the weight of four score years. Neither the vigor of youth, nor the maturity of age can resist the shock of death, nor save men from the devouring tomb.

To all of us, therefore, this event gives an urgent call to prepare to meet our God. Death comes to all, but he often comes with little previous warning. We know not what a day may bring forth. In the midst of life we are in death. Even while in hopes of a long extended life of usefulness, many are suddenly cut off. On the day previous to Mr Rankin's death he wrote with his own hand a letter to his partner here, which he concluded with a postscript, in which he expressed his expectation of reaching Miramichi by the end of May; yet by ten o'clock on the following day he had ceased to breathe. A letter from his brother, dated Liverpool, 6th April, 1852, gives the following account of the concluding period of

his life :—" He had been in a weak state ever since he came to this country, but no apprehensions were entertained either by himself or his friends, that his end was so nigh. He left this three weeks ago, for London and Winchester, where I think he had not been very well, and returned to London on Monday week last. I saw him there on Tuesday, and he assured me he felt very much better. On Wednesday he consulted Dr. Copeland, who encouraged him ; and on Thursday he came to Bromborough Hall, and really felt so well and strong that the same evening he took a long walk over the farm with Mr Ritchie. On Friday he was engaged in writing letters to New Brunswick, and really ate more, and felt better, and enjoyed better spirits than he had done for a long time. But, alas, we know not what a day may bring forth, as in the morning he was seized with internal bleeding, which eventually tended to suffocate him, and although the doctor was twice with him that morning, it was of no avail, as God had willed it otherwise, and I trust he is now in rest and happiness ; leaving a bright example to all his friends who are left behind, as few men possessing more sterling worth and kindness of disposition ever lived."

Seek, then, the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Behold now is the accepted time ; behold now is the day of salvation. Be ye, therefore, ready ; for at such a time as ye think not the Son of Man cometh. And if he come and find us unpre-

pared, how fearful would be our condition ; but if we are in Christ Jesus reconciled to God through his blood, then sudden death would be but sudden glory. Flee, then, by faith, to the refuge which is set before you in the Gospel. Behold by faith the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world. Look unto him and be ye saved all ends of the earth. He waits to be gracious. Trust, then, in the Lord Jehovah, and he will sustain your hearts. When heart and flesh do faint and fail, then the Lord will be the strength of your heart, and your portion forever. He will guide you by his counsel here, and hereafter receive you to his glory.

